

Proper 17 (A), Pentecost 12. August 31, 2014. (Matt. 16: 21-28)

I once said something very smart. And so, naturally, I said it almost on accident and pretty much immediately forgot it. But my wife Jackie kindly reminded me that I had said it, for which I am very grateful. What I had said was: “When it comes to talking about theology/faith/God, one of the most important things for us to remember is that we might be wrong.” Of course, it’s very comforting to forget this, and very discomfoting to remember it. Many of us hope to make our love of God and God’s love of us be the determining factor in our lives—I’m sure that we mostly fail at this, but part of the Christian way is always to be trying to accept God’s love more fully, and to return it more truthfully. And if we are trying to stake our lives on this effort, then it is deeply terrifying to think that we might be wrong—at least about some of it.

Today’s gospel is about Peter being wrong. And boy is he ever wrong. He’s so wrong that Jesus calls him “Satan,” which is a pretty intense thing to say to a friend who has left his job and family behind to follow you around the countryside. But Peter is terribly wrong, which is all the more remarkable because in the passage right before this, he was as right as he ever is.

To fully get what’s at stake in this passage, we have to reach back to last week’s reading. Last week, Jesus asked the disciples “who do people say that I am?” And they listed a bunch of options, after which Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter has one of his finest moments in the Bible. He responds: You are the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God. It is a rare moment of triumph for the disciples—our poor ancestors in the faith who so often put so much on the line for this man, only to find that they were doing it all wrong. But here, Jesus says “You’re right, and the Spirit has revealed this to you, and you are Rocky and on this rock will I build my church.”

And with no intermediary between that passage and this, Peter goes from the rock on which the church will be built to the stumbling stone lying in Jesus’ path, trying to trip him up. What on earth happened? At heart, Peter has gotten it right that Jesus is the Messiah, but is wrong about what it means to be the Messiah.

There were lots of ideas floating around early Judaism about what the Messiah would look like, and not everyone was even looking for a Messiah at all. It was a little bit like the end of the world in Christianity: some people talk about the rapture, some people talk about the second coming, Episcopalians shift around uncomfortably, some people just try not to think about it, and others expect imminent ecological catastrophe and may or may not tie that to God at all.

So I’m not sure exactly what Peter thought the Messiah was supposed to look like, but obviously he didn’t think that it involved going to Jerusalem and undergoing great suffering, and being killed, and on the third day being raised. He probably thought that it involved, instead, going to Jerusalem, defeating the Romans, and instituting a politics of peace and justice for all Jews and all people, emanating out from a capitol in Jerusalem. We know from later in the gospel that when push comes to shove, Peter thinks that grabbing a sword and cutting off people’s ears is a good way to follow Jesus.

We’ll say more about these two different ideas about being the Messiah in a moment, but first, I want to pause to reflect on being wrong about God. I am sure that I am not the only person in the room who has been accused of thinking that he or she

is always right. And the appropriate response, of course, is that obviously I always think I'm right. If I thought that I were wrong, I would change my position.

But the price that we pay for always being right (besides angering our friends and family all the time) is being immune to surprise. And it doesn't matter whether we're actually right or not—when we know that we're right, we tend not to see the evidence that we might be wrong. And thus, those moments of beauty, of truth, of grace that should surprise us are instead dismissed as not relevant, before we've even really noticed them.

Now that may work for some kinds of faith, but when it comes to faith in the God of the Bible, that is a very dangerous position to put ourselves in. Because the God we see in the Bible is a God of surprises. A God who, in Abraham, picked a no count liar to be the father of the chosen people, and in his wife Sarah, an old woman who couldn't have children and was a murdering slaveholder, to be the mother of the chosen people. In Moses, God picks another murderer to lead the Israelites out of slavery and into a promised land.

When times are good, this God sends prophets to announce that doom is coming, and when times are bad, these same prophets announce that God's salvation is at hand. And finally, the salvation of the whole world comes as a baby, born to a poor couple in a manger. Yes, our God is a God of surprises. And if we are so sure that we are always right, then we run the great risk of missing the joy of seeing the surprising ways that God is saving us.

Peter knows how salvation is going to come. Or at least, he knows that it isn't going to involve great suffering, death, and resurrection. I suspect that he thinks about salvation in a way that is similar to how I often think about it. That once we can convince God to get involved, a thunderbolt will come from on high and fix all of our problems in a snap. And I think that Jesus could have done this. It may be that his response is so strong and so stern precisely because this is a temptation for him: he could just go to Jerusalem, teleport the Romans wherever they couldn't hurt people, love the religious leaders into a conversion, and sit back and relax on a throne.

But that's not the plan. God's salvation in Jesus isn't coming through a *deus ex machina*, but through a *deus ex hominis* (which I think means "God from humanity," but I don't really know Latin): not a divine snap of the fingers, but through the very messiness and pain of our human lives. Because it is that very messiness and pain that is in need of redemption. Jesus goes through suffering and death, and so our suffering and death is itself redeemed.

Let me say quickly here that this passage has been used to justify great oppression, and people have been told that slavery, enforced poverty, and being denied civil rights are their "cross to bear." This isn't right (and I'm pretty sure that I'm not wrong). Our suffering is not necessary for our salvation, but when we are suffering, God is with us and is working even then for our salvation. And suffering, or even catastrophe, is not a reflection of our degree of discipleship—it is simply one of the contexts in which we live our discipleship.

Let us pray: God of surprises, we thank you for the unexpected ways in which you are saving us; for your saving work moving through the very messiness and pain of this life. Grant us the nimbleness to act in the conviction of faith, while remaining open to the unforeseen ways you are loving us into our full being. When we are wrong, let us greet correction with joy and evermore find new hope in your loving purposes. Amen.